

Sunday April 16, 2000 (The A16 Anti IMF/World Bank action in Washington DC)

By Starhawk

Sunday, A16: We have been blockading all day in a giant spiderweb, an intersection entirely surrounded by webs of yarn that effectively prevent free movement into the street. We have been drawn here by Willow's nose, following the energy. The intersection is held by a cluster from Asheville that includes many labor union people. In Seattle, we were cheered in jail to hear that the ILWU had shut down every port on the West coast in solidarity with our action. Here on the streets of Washington DC, we are blockading arm in arm with the Ecofeminist Teamsters. In front of the police blockade, an affinity group is locked down, sitting in a line with their arms locked together. Their supporters surround them, bring them water, administer sunscreen, and hold the keys.

I am really, really happy to be part of a movement that includes a group of ecofeminist teamsters. They ask us for some help in shifting the energy, which is loud, raucous and confrontational. I join the group of drummers in the center. I don't have my own drum today, just a bucket and sticks which works fairly well except when it falls off the rope tied around my waist. I start to drum with the group in the center, trying to entrain as I know the only way to shift a rhythm is first to join with it. With the help of some of the singers in our group, we manage to shift into a song: "We have come too far, we won't turn around, we'll flood the streets with justice, we are freedom bound."

I'm thinking about all the energies we'd invoked at the ritual the night before, Brigid, Oya, the Norns, the Red Dragon. At that moment, a red dragon made of cloth and ribbons dances into the intersection atop of line of smiling young protestors. It circles the intersection, and the energy shifts.

This magic is played out against a background of stark though unacknowledged fear. In all our affinity group's discussions about who to invoke and how to arrange early morning transport, I don't think we've ever simply said, "I'm afraid." I haven't said it because I've pushed the fear down so far it doesn't easily surface, and because what I'm most afraid of is that someone else, someone I persuaded to come to this action, will get hurt. And also, I suppose, because I think the group looks to me to project calm and confidence, when really what might help us all most would be to simply be able to say "I'm scared. Are you scared, too?"

We're scared because we are out on the street risking arrest in a city that has been turned into a police state. Sixty square blocks have been barricaded off. The day before, 600 people were arrested in a pre-emptive strike at a peaceful march. They weren't warned or allowed to leave. Our Convergence Center was shut down the same morning, with thousands of people arriving that day to be trained. Our puppets and medical supplies were confiscated. Although the puppets were eventually released, the medical supplies remain under lock and key.

I spent Saturday morning wandering in the rain with a group of about eighty people for whom I was trying to do a nonviolence training. The church we headed to was flanked by police and so overcrowded we could not possibly squeeze in. We set off for a park, but a runner informed us that the police were throwing people out of it. Eventually, I just stopped on the corner and said to the group, "Look, you can come back in the afternoon and try to get into a training, or we can just do it in the road." "Let's do it!" they'd cried, and so we ducked into an alley, arranged a fallback point in case we had to scatter, and did the training right there, with police cruising half a block away. "I must be a Witch," I said to Willow after she finally found us toward the end of the morning. "I just disappeared eighty people!"

We are afraid of the police: they have guns, clubs, tear gas and pepper spray, and all the power of the state at their disposal. They can beat, gas or jail us with relative impunity. What's hard to grasp is how much they are afraid of us. Some of our group are wearing black and covering their faces and they look like the folks in Seattle that broke windows and made the police look bad. Mostly, I think, the police are afraid of the unknown. Someone in the crowd could have a bomb. Those bubbling vats in the convergence kitchen could be homemade pepper spray instead of lunch. Those bottles of turpentine could have some nefarious purpose other than removal of the paint used in banner making.

Now the two groups, each perceiving themselves as righteous and the other side as potentially violent, are squaring off on the streets of our nation's capital.

Later: Willow, Evergreen and I are returning from a trek to the bathrooms blocks away. We see a barricade half-built across the street. A dumpster has been dragged into the middle of the street, and a few broken pieces of furniture lie atop it. Other pieces of debris strew the roadside. A couple of cars have been lifted up and set down at forty five degree angles. Our much-debated nonviolence guidelines state that we will not damage property. The

cars are unharmed, but moving them has certainly put them in harm's way. It is an action right on the edge of what the guidelines allow: but then we know many people are unhappy at having guidelines at all, and agree to them with the greatest reluctance.

Behind the dumpster, a circle of people stand engrossed in a heated meeting. They are discussing the barricade. David, my partner, is in the midst of them. As I listen, I soon realize what has happened. The young man in black, the tall Rasta from the Caribbean, and some of the others have built the barricade. David has been taking it down even as they build it up. Now they are having a spokescouncil meeting. A young woman from the Ecofeminist Teamsters is facilitating.

The people who built the barricade see it as protective. We hear rumors that the cops have been running over people with motorcycles. The barricade builders view it as our defense. David sees it as endangering us, as upping the ante of confrontation and potentially provoking violence. Most of the barricade builders are young: he is middle aged, he looks and sounds like somebody's Dad, which in fact he is. He's somebody's granddad, for that matter. He's also a man who burned his draft card in the Vietnam War and spent two years of his youth in Federal Prison. His lifelong pacifism is staunch and unshakeable, and I've never known him to back down on a matter of principle. Next to him is a young, black clad, masked protestor who looks like the classic image of the anarchist/terrorist. He is listening thoughtfully to the discussion.

I look at that circle and see all the tensions, fears and hopes that have surrounded this action. I've been here for close to a week, doing trainings, going to meetings, sitting in on every spokescouncil. I know that we have deep divisions among us on the question of how this action should be conducted. In the spokescouncils, the strongest voice generally seems to belong to those who want a more confrontational action, who chafe against the nonviolence guidelines and are ready to do battle in the streets. But in the nonviolence trainings I've done, and on the street itself, I hear the voices of those for whom the guidelines are vitally important, and who want a stronger commitment to nonviolence, to communication as well as confrontation.

This is the kind of issue that has torn movements apart. Those of us who are old enough to remember the Sixties have seen it happen again and again. We know how easy it is for this energy to turn sour and dissipate. We've seen strong organizations splinter apart around questions of tactics. Much stronger than any fear I might have of the police is my fear that this blessed wild unlooked-for movement, this rising tide of rage and passion for justice

will founder in the same way I've seen movements founder before, that we'll end up denouncing each other instead of the IMF, or that small splinter groups will take us too quickly into forms of action so extreme they leave our base of support far behind.

This energy is rare and precious. It's the one thing that can't be organized or created. When it's present, it's unstoppable, but when it goes, it's gone. And in thirty years of political activism, I've learned how quickly it can go.

"What's amazing," I say to the group, "is that we're having this dialogue. Under all this tension and in the middle of the action, that we're willing to discuss this and listen to each other. That may be as important as anything else we do on the street today."

The black masked anarchist, the Rasta, the Ecofeminist Teamster facilitator, the other affinity group representatives, and even David himself are all nodding in agreement. Eventually, a compromise is reached: David will not take down any more of the barricade, and no one else will add to it or build it up. I don't know which amazes me more: that the barricade builders agree, or that David does. By the end of the day, the dumpster has become a giant drum, a symbol both of our differences and of the process we use to resolve them, a living testimony to the true democracy we have brought to confront the systems of political and economic control.

We are in the Ellipse. The blockade is over. The march and rally are done. We are lying in the shade, napping after an exhausting day, when someone comes running.

"The cops are trying to sweep the park! There's Riot Cops massing over there in the corner!"

We can't really believe the police would do something so unprovoked and stupid, but a few of us go to see what is happening. A line of Park Police on horseback are threading their way through clumps of people seated on the grass and alarming a small contingent of the DAR in pink suits and pearls, who scatter toward their building across the way. We follow the horses, and they move out into Constitution Avenue, form a line, and begin, or so it seems, to try to push the crowd off the street. Half the crowd are panicking and the other half are shouting at the cops and challenging the horses and in a moment, many people are going to get badly hurt. It's a situation so dangerous and unprovoked that I'm ready to get arrested just in protest of its stupidity, or so I tell Dan Fireheart who is right behind me. But suddenly I

know that I have to get to the front of the crowd. I catch hold of some lightning bolt of energy and streak through, checking myself as I go, "Is this really for me to do?" I know it is because suddenly I'm there, doing it, yelling "Sit down! Sit down with your legs out!" And doing it myself with enough conviction that others follow suit. In a moment, the crowd is sitting down or lying in front of the horses, who stop. I am sitting with my legs out toward a horse whose feet stand between my ankles. One of my arms is outstretched as if to say "Stop!" I can't seem to move it or put it down. Dan Fireheart reaches forward from behind me and takes my other hand. The horse is very big. The policeman on his back will not look me in the eye. Down the line, a cop tells a young woman protestor "I don't want to trample you but if my boss orders me to move forward, I'll have to." I've been teaching people for twenty years in nonviolence trainings that horses do not like to walk into uneven ground and won't trample people if you sit down or lie down in front of them, but I've never tested it before. The horse shifts its weight. I remember that we called on the spirits of the land itself to support us. I can feel all the rings of magical energy and protection being sent to this action. They surround me like ripples in a pond, converging toward me instead of dispersing out. I still cannot seem to put my hand down.

Half the people around me look like they're part of the Black bloc. In this moment, we have total solidarity. There are no more questions of tactics or style or guidelines, we are simply there together, facing the same threat, making the same stand, facing the same fear.

There's a line of riot cops behind the horses, so they can't move back. We all sit, frozen in time. I reach up, let the horse sniff my hand. The horse and I, we're in complete agreement. He doesn't want to step on me, and I don't want him to. Behind us, someone from the Committee for Full Enjoyment begins a chant: "It's not about the cops, it's about the IMF!" The crowd takes it up, and the energy unifies.

Then I realize there is a second line of horses behind our horses, facing the other way. It seems as if they've just come in from somewhere. They form a kind of open V with the riot cops in the middle. The crowd facing those horses begins to shout and panic. They're yelling at the horses and trying to push them back and throwing horse manure at the cops. The riot cops get out of the way. The horses are dancing and stumbling and being pushed into our horses who will have nowhere to move and stumble except on top of us. We begin chanting at the other crowd to sit down. They don't listen. "Sit down! Sit down! Sit down!" we chant. Finally they get it. They sit down. The horses stop. We breathe again. At some point in the melee, one young man does get stepped on, and is left with a broken leg.

Now the horses are trapped. They have nowhere to go. I look up at the policeman who still won't meet my eye. "Officer, you have created an incredibly dangerous situation here, for us, for yourselves, for the horses! What were you thinking of? And how can we get you out of this?" I am fully prepared to try to negotiate with the crowd to let the horses out, but he still won't look at me. Off to the side, the riot cops move in. They begin literally throwing people around, until they clear a passage where the horses can file out. We scoot forward and then stand up and follow them, taking over the street, chanting "Whose streets? Our streets!" On the other end of Constitution Avenue, a line of riot cops stands, batons ready. We are fully prepared to be arrested, but they don't move, simply hold their own blockade as the drums thunder and the victory dance begins.

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